

Black Angel

NANCY SPRINGER

Times were tough for the Jersey Devil. Hoofprints on the housetops, which were enough to win his South Devon granddaddy¹ uproar and a place in the history books back in 1855, went all but unnoticed in the Garden State in the days since the New Jersey Turnpike had replaced the supernatural as most Jerseyites' personal experience of hell. When something screamed like a woman in the pine barrens, Jersey dwellers assumed it was a woman, presumably a New Yorker, screaming in the pine barrens. Few humans, even young humans, bothered to stray into the ever-shrinking sand-and-scrub wilds of south Jersey anymore; for adventure, they preferred Nintendo. What was a weird manifestation² to do for attention? Not to speak of food. Few people kept chickens in their backyards anymore. What was a meat-eating equine³ to do for blood? Hooves were not meant for hunting.

What a bite. Skulking in the moonlit scrub along a secondary highway, searching for a nice fresh roadkill but affronted by the odor of rancid opossum, the Jersey Devil indulged in despondent and rebellious thoughts. *Why do I even bother with the rules anymore? There's no respect for monsters left in the world. Life has lost all meaning, all mystery. How can I compete with TV? I might as well start showing myself in daylight and be done with it.*

1 **South Devon granddaddy:** a reference to a historical account of horselike footprints left in Devon, a county in southwestern England, in 1855.

2 **manifestation:** a ghost or dweller of the underworld

3 **equine:** horse

"A horse!" whispered a breathy, youthful female voice.

In the shadow of a scrub pine the Jersey Devil froze, outraged to be caught by surprise but even more outraged to be mistaken for a common horse. *Can't you see the red fire of my eyes in the darkness? Can't you see how blackly I loom?*

What are you doing out here?

The pine barrens, or what pitiful remnants were left of the pine barrens, belonged to creature denizens at night. By the rules, the human had to be frightened away. Lifting a head worthy of an equine gargoyle, stretching his heavy, muscular neck, and working his bulky chest like a bellows, the Jersey Devil let out his distinctive scream, a warning as chilling as a panther's screech.

"What's the matter, horsie?" The girl pattered forward from the shadows. "I love horses," she said in soft, exalted tones. "What's the matter? Are you caught in that bush?" The nincompoop seemed to have taken his challenge as a squall for help. Exactly what sort of brain damage was this human suffering? "Oh!" She stopped where she stood, a preadolescent wraith⁴ in the moonlight. "Oh," she breathed in tones yet more hushed, more rapt, "oh, wings! You're a Pegasus! Oh!"

Poised to scream again, the Jersey Devil gave an undignified grunt of surprise instead. Surprise and sneaking gratification. He had always felt, though never daring to do more than think it, that he was at least as worthy of immortalization as Pegasus.⁵ Why should a beautiful white, grass-eating horse with wings be considered a major-league mythological creature, while a not-so-beautiful black, meat-eating horse with wings—bat wings—was considered a monster, and a minor one at that? It was unfair. It was discrimination.

This girl was obviously exceptionally intelligent among humans. The Jersey Devil lowered his rawboned head to regard her with unwonted⁶ interest. There she stood, fearless, a skinny child in owlish glasses, her clothing skimpy and cottony and undistinguished, her feet bare and curled in protest against the pine needles—he noticed the pallor of her feet in the moonlight, small fishlike surfaces even whiter than the south Jersey sand. Why did humans have such soft and inadequate feet? Dependent upon shoes. How pitiful.

4 **wraith**: ghostlike figure

5 **Pegasus**: a winged horse of Greek mythology

6 **unwonted**: unaccustomed; unusual

"I must be hungrier than I thought," the girl murmured. "I seem to be seeing things." She stepped forward until she stood directly by the Jersey Devil's shoulder, her soft feet inches from his hooves, her scrawny hand reaching for him. He shuddered at her touch yet was so fascinated by her lack of fear that he did not move either to escape or resist that fumbling contact. "No, they're real," she whispered, stroking the leather of his wings.

Her touch was as weak as her voice. Her lack of fear was perhaps due to—what? Had something driven her out here, to the darkness, the wilderness? Out of her home and out of her mind? Some extremity?⁷

"I guess somebody heard me after all," she said. "They sent me a horse angel."

Oh, sure. Give me a break.

"What are you doing stuck in this bush?" she asked the Jersey Devil. "Are you okay?" She limped around his head to scout the other side of him, running her hand down his neck. Crouching, tense, and more than a trifle discombobulated,⁸ he still stood pressed into the shelter of a scrub pine as if it could hide him from her. "Are you caught by your mane or something?" Her hand groped, trying to ascertain that he was not. "I don't know a thing about horses," she confided.

Noooooo, no kidding. Even an ordinary farm horse had hooves that could trample her or kick her into next week, not to speak of inch-long chisel-like teeth that could sink into her. The Jersey Devil, being a meat eater, had even nastier teeth. Customized. *Want to see my fangs?* But he did not show them to her.

"Except that I read *The Black Stallion*," the girl added. "Can I ride you, black horse?" she asked wistfully.

Oh, for Heaven's sake . . .

He was already breaking all the rules. If a human did not run from his scream, he was supposed to rampage and snarl and glare and breathe fire until the human did run, and if those tactics failed, he was supposed to traumatize the human with his hooves. But poop on all that. Poop by the scoop. He just didn't feel like it.

Fine. Whatever.

He stepped away from the pine, arched his neck, and lowered his head in a fairy-tale gesture of equine acquiescence.⁹ Apparently she knew

7 **extremity**: an extreme danger or need

8 **discombobulated**: confused; upset

9 **acquiescence**: consent; approval

enough about fairy tales, if not about horses, to recognize the body language. She immediately grabbed his mane and scrambled on. Those soft feet had usages after all. Her monkey toes dug into his foreleg and shoulder as she climbed him. Lightweight, she settled behind his withers,¹⁰ her knees hooked around the junctures of his wings.

"Ooooh," she said, her voice worshipful and delighted, "it's high up here."

The Jersey Devil set off at a sullen, jarring walk, emerging from the pine scrub to plod down the berm¹¹ of the highway. So what if cars came by. So what if people saw him. His job description was ruined anyhow, and he wasn't sure what would happen to a minor monster who was doing some major messing up. His boss would have a few things to say, that was for sure.

"Oh, thank you," the girl said, though it was not clear for what she was thanking him, "thank you. Nobody else cares."

Shut up.

She did not shut up. "Nobody believes me, that's the problem," she said more softly. "Even my best girlfriend. Nobody wants to believe what's happening to me."

Like the girlfriend and the anonymous others, the Jersey Devil did not want to deal with it. *I've got my own problems.* He walked faster, slamming his heels into the ground with each step.

A mile passed, and another. Gradually his stride eased as the girl's warm presence massaged him. On his back she had gone into a trance of glory and was wordlessly singing. "I'll call you Blackie," she said suddenly. "No, that's stupid. I'll call you Black, uh, Black Angel." She said the name like an apotheosis.¹²

Up to this point the Jersey Devil had had only superficial experience of humans: Screech at them, and they ran. He had not had occasion to deal with the nearly religious fervor of a horse-besotted¹³ girl. Her unquestioning adoration put him off balance.

"Where are we going?" she asked with utter faith.

Going? The Jersey Devil had not been thinking in terms of going anywhere. She wanted a horsie ride, and he was giving her a horsie ride. But

¹⁰ **withers:** area between the shoulder bones of a horse

¹¹ **berm:** mound of earth; here, berm refers to the mound the highway is built upon

¹² **apotheosis:** glorification; adoration

¹³ **besotted:** infatuated

now she had called him Black Angel, and she wanted to know where they were going—she expected him to take care of her? There was a large explosion in his small brain, expressed in a snort the size of the pine barrens, the original, not the remnants. Okay. Okay, he knew where they were going. They were going to get her something to eat, and they were going to plunge him all the way into deep manure. They were going somewhere he had never been in his entire three-hundred-year life.

They were going to McDonald's.

▲ ▲ ▲

His belly had been growling before they started, and it had become mighty in *borborgymus*¹⁴ by the time they arrived at the golden arches. He saw at once that the puny doors were not large enough for him—too bad. Like a Mack truck going relentlessly into reverse, he backed up to the glass, feeling the girl grab his mane as she divined¹⁵ his intentions; he kicked. She shrieked with glee as if on an amusement park ride. Other shrieks sounded from inside, not gleeful at all, and the Jersey Devil snorted with excitement, roused by the screams. He warmed to the sound of crashing, tinkling glass. As he continued to enlarge the entrance, the restaurant was emptying via the other doors. Cars zoomed from the parking lot, and he heard the girl on his back laughing. Such an intelligent child; she was not afraid. Not afraid at all.

He had opened almost the entire front of the establishment. There was no need for her to duck or risk her bare feet on broken glass as he carried her inside. Clear to the counter, where he stopped as if at a mounting block. She slipped down from his back to stand on the countertop, wobbling a little and hanging onto him until she got her legs back. "There's nobody to wait on us," she said, laughing.

The staff had disappeared from the kitchen area, as the Jersey Devil knew quite well; he had seen people in clownish uniforms running through the parking lot.

"I guess it's okay for me to help myself, since they ran away." She was serious now, wanting to know whether it was morally correct for her, a starving child, to take food, and she decided that since her guardian angel had brought her here, it had to be all right. "Are you hungry?" She dropped to her bony bottom and scooted down off the counter, heading

14 *borborgymus*: intestinal noises caused by moving gas

15 *divined*: predicted; understood

for where the paper-wrapped hamburgers were ranked on the rack underneath the heat lamp. She grabbed an armload of burgers, unwrapping several and spreading them on the counter in front of the Jersey Devil before she bit into one herself.

Ick. Cooked meat. No better than possum cooked in the sun for three days on an asphalt highway.

Still, the Jersey Devil ate. The bread was not too bad, though squashed. The dill pickle slices were interesting. But he soon diverted his attention from the burgers on the countertop to the leavings on the tables. There was a good grease smell emanating from many small cardboard containers, and thereby he discovered fries. Salty fries, he decided, are almost as good as fresh raw chicken with the feathers on. He munched them, cardboard and all. Behind the counter, the girl had gulped down three burgers and was holding her open mouth under the Coke spigot as she pushed the button.

In french fry gestalt,¹⁶ the Jersey Devil only gradually became aware of an annoying noise: sirens. Louder, nearer. The next moment, several police cars screeched into the McDonald's parking lot.

With her bare feet making slapping noises on the floor, the girl came out from behind the counter, stood near the side door, and looked at the Jersey Devil as if awaiting directions. He was her bat-winged equine angel. She would do whatever he said.

Go away. Let me alone. He just wanted to eat fries. He was not afraid of the cops—their bullets could not so much as dent his black, supernatural hide. His fear was of other authorities.

The police had scurried and deployed themselves. McDonald's seemed to have a hot line straight to the precinct. "Come out with your hands up!" a cop barked into a megaphone.

If I come out with my hooves up, you're not going to like it, fella.

"Captain," one of the other cops yelled from near a side window, "I see him. Holy cow, it's some kind of big animal." The police officer, a youngster, maybe a rookie, began to shake as if with buck fever.¹⁷ Having just discovered Chicken McNuggets en papier, the Jersey Devil did not even bother to glare as the young cop leveled his gun barrel and fired. Glass flew with a soprano song. The bullet ricocheted off the Jersey

16 **gestalt**: process whereby an individual takes in experience as a whole rather than in isolated parts; here, euphoria; happiness

17 **buck fever**: excitement of an inexperienced hunter when confronting game for the first time

Devil and shot harmlessly into a Ronald McDonald effigy¹⁸ grinning in the corner, but the impact annoyed the Jersey Devil. He screeched and reared. Red lightning flashed in his eyes.

“Don’t! Don’t shoot at him; you’ll hurt him!” The girl came running, placing her skinny body between the Jersey Devil and the offending cop.

Too late the Jersey Devil realized that although bullets could not kill him, they might very well kill her. He had to get her out of there.

It was a thought that upset the order of his universe, throwing a three-century lifetime’s worth of assumptions into confusion. Not that confusion would not have existed anyway. There were shouts, another gunshot, yells—“Don’t, idiot, you’ll hit the kid!” He clattered across vinyl flooring and knocked tables cockeyed in his haste to stand by her, and she seemed to comprehend; she scrambled onto him. Her hand felt firm on his mane. She was okay so far.

He wheeled and leaped through the wide-open front entry. Instinctively, as whenever his adrenaline got going, his wings spread and beat the air. With his softly furred patagia¹⁹ vibrating like drumheads, nearly singing, he surged upward. His forehooves struck the roof of the nearest cruiser; he tucked them and rose steeply, tidily clearing the ornamental pear trees.

“Oh,” the girl squealed, “we’re flying!”

She was not the only one who was impressed. The manly shoutings down below were achieving new heights of frenzy.

“Black Angel,” the girl said, her voice hushed now, “this is wonderful. I’ve always wanted to fly.”

Just hang on. If you splat, I’m not going to be the vulture that eats you.

The hoarse vociferations²⁰ of the police and onlookers faded away behind them. Flying at about five hundred feet over the lights of town, lugging a bit under the unaccustomed weight of a passenger, the Jersey Devil wheeled sluggishly southward toward the friendly darkness of the pine barrens. Now that his belly was approximately full, all he wanted was to get home, ditch this kid, and rest.

Sirens. Blue lights flashing on the roads below. The cops were following.

“Black Angel,” the girl said with a panicky catch in her voice, “don’t let them get me. Please don’t. They’ll send me back home . . .”

18 **effigy**: image or representation of a person

19 **patagia**: folds of skin near the front of a bird’s wings

20 **vociferations**: yells, screams

It was the first time he had discerned fear in her. She was not afraid of him, a grotesque denizen of the night, yet she feared—who? what? It had to be a monster beyond imagining.

The police cruisers were following easily. Despite his bat wings, the Jersey Devil did not dart like a bat. Due to the bulk of his body, his air speed was modest, and he was too unwieldy to attempt sudden directional changes. Too bad. If he could swoop, maybe he could lose this kid.

"Please," she begged, her voice thin, terrified. "I can't go back there."

Of course, there were unquestionably ways he could get rid of her. All it would take would be a midair bucking spree—but even as he rather venomously thought that, he knew he was not going to do it.

"Please, Angel, do something."

I could bomb their windshields. But he knew that all the poop he had in him would not help for long. *All right, okay!* He did not like it, but he knew he would have to do it sooner or later anyway. Might as well take her with him. Maybe she could help plead his case.

To the watchers on the ground, looking up at his grotesque underbelly and wings and at the frail child riding him—"Write it up as a stranger abduction," the captain was telling the cop stuck with that unenviable job—to the watchers looking up at the bizarre horse-bat clearly visible in moonlight and in the light pollution from below, it was as if the apparition²¹ vanished in midair, rider and all.

But to the Jersey Devil, a very minor nighttime manifestation in an unlikely place at an unsympathetic time, it was not that he had vanished. It was merely that, with a sigh and a sour-tempered rolling of his eyes, he had gone to face his tribunal.²²

▲ ▲ ▲

This was not a nighttime place. This was a place where it was always light yet never light. A place forever dimly aglow in lambent²³ rainbow mist.

"Fool! Three-hundred-year upstart! A mere sprout! Who are you to dare to extemporize?"²⁴

It was the World Tree who spoke, she whose crown was forever veiled in mist and mystery, she for whom "goddess" was too lowly a title. Even had the Jersey Devil not been kneeling before her, nose to the ground,

21 **apparition**: ghost; specter

22 **tribunal**: court, forum of justice

23 **lambent**: softly bright; radiant

24 **extemporize**: improvise; deviate from the plan

even had he been standing, he would have been able to see only the very least and lowest of her mighty branches stretching far overhead. Perching on the visible branches and looking down with a certain smug satisfaction (or so the Jersey Devil sensed) were various of the lesser mythical birds: the Gillygaloo (which laid cubical eggs and wept constantly), the lop-winged Whangdoodle, the backward Smollygaster, and many others, but no manifestations of any importance. Major mythological personages such as the Phoenix or the Roc would never be seen on such lowly branches; they were far overhead and out of sight, if indeed they were present at all. And the other winged beings, such as the Pegasus—of course they were far above, swaddled and haloed and glorified in fog. If the Pegasus were flying anywhere in the neighborhood, the Jersey Devil would never see him.



"Do you understand what you have done?" the World Tree continued to scold. "This girl, what are we to do with her? Now that she has seen us, she can never return."

"I don't want to return," the girl spoke up, her piping tone so brash in this empyrean²⁵ place that the Jersey Devil winced and trembled. "I don't care what happens to me. It can't be any worse than what has happened already."

"Nonsense. What can possibly be worse than exile from your people?"

The girl told her. As she spoke, and as the Jersey Devil began to comprehend, he felt an unfamiliar burning sensation within his chest, a hot pain that heaved his ribs, surged upward, and blocked his throat, stung his eyes. Without leave from the World Tree, he arose from his knees and went to the girl. What was this punishment taking hold of him, this salt-water tide of misery? His eyes were so blurred he could barely see the child as he reached out his gargoyle head to nuzzle her. The anguish ran out of his eyes and down his long, ugly face.

She turned to him and hugged him around his neck, hiding her face in his mane, and his tears dripped down on her back and shoulders. There was silence.

"Well . . ." the World Tree said at last, quite softly for such a presence.

The girl did not reply, but her head had lifted from the Jersey Devil's neck and behind her thick glasses her eyes were wide and shining. She gasped, "Wings!"

At the same time the Jersey Devil saw them budding, sprouting from her shoulders, pushing through the cloth of her cheap shirt—fabric weaved from his tears—the way spring flowers push through last year's leaves. Wings worthy of a skylark. Airy, uplifted wings the color of raindrops.

Humbly the Jersey Devil turned to the World Tree and said it first. "Thank you, Mother."

"Nonsense. I gave her nothing. You gave them to her."

"I—I can fly?" stammered the girl. "Oh! Oh! Thank you! I've always wanted to fly." She jiggled, jumped, stood on tiptoes with arms outstretched.

"In a moment, little one. Patience. You, Black Thing, come here."

The Jersey Devil bowed his head and took a few steps forward. He sensed that it might be politic²⁶ to kneel again. But he did not.

"I am going to give you a change of assignment," said the World Tree.

²⁵ **empyrean**: heavenly; ideal

²⁶ **politic**: shrewdly tactful; expedient

"Decide for yourself whether it is an advancement or a demotion. I'll never tell."

It was hard to know how to react to the World Tree when she got that quirk in her voice. One did not quite dare to joke with her. The Jersey Devil said nothing.

"The pine barrens are a lost cause since the Turnpike went through," the World Tree said in resigned and contemplative tones. "Confine yourself to them no longer. Your new task is this: You are to seek out those who hurt children. By whatever means you choose, make their lives difficult. Do I make myself clear?"

The Jersey Devil's head had come up. His upper lip wrinkled in the equine equivalent of a smile. His fangs showed. He bowed low, then wheeled away, eager to get started.

"Little one," the World Tree concluded in bored tones, "you had better fly along with him to make sure he gets it right. He is rather stupid."

"All right!" The girl sprang into the timeless air. Her thin face grew rapt with the astonishment and glory of flying. Her glasses shone like the rainbow mist. "Come on, Black Angel!" she cried.

He leaped to fly beside her. When her wings grew tired, he would take her upon his back. He would soar smoothly so as not to joggle her, and perhaps she would lay her head on his neck and sleep.

My name is not Jersey Devil anymore.

Perhaps a monster, a devil, is not so far from being an angel. Perhaps the girl had named him rightly. Black Angel, Avenging Angel. What is an angel but a strange creature with wings?

▲ ▲ ▲

The Jersey Devil is a holdover from an earlier era when the pine barrens of southern New Jersey were thinly populated and scary enough to support a supernatural manifestation. A horselike creature that was reputed to scream horribly in the barrens, leave hoofprints on housetops, kill chickens, and occasionally fly, the Jersey Devil might be a descendant of other horse-demons such as the Irish Pooka or whatever weird thing it was that left an arrow-straight line of hoofprints in fresh snow for ninety-seven miles along the South Devon coast in 1855. ∞